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ABSTRACT

The impact of school-based management (SBM) on student performance is examined in this digest. The first part describes school-based management and its potential for improving student performance. A review of research concludes that, overall, school-based management has not contributed to consistent or stable improvements in student performance. Reasons for SBM's insignificant impact are attributed to piecemeal implementation, neglect of classroom instruction and curriculum, and lack of teacher authority. A conclusion is that halfway measures do not result in substantially improved student achievement; true school-based management involves radical restructuring that shifts power and accountability from the central office to the school. (13 references) (LMI)

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School-Based Management and Student Performance

by David Peterson

School-based management is one of several reforms proposed and instituted over the past decade to improve public education. Its "ultimate goal," as White (1989) points out, "is to improve the teaching and learning environment for students." This ERIC Digest will address how school-based management has affected student performance. Since research on this topic is extremely limited, this Digest's conclusions are necessarily tentative.

What Is School-Based Management?

School-based management (SBM) programs decentralize districts' decisions by locating them in the schools. Shareholders normally include teachers and principals; some SBM programs reach out as well to parents, students, and other community members.

In some districts, principals appropriate almost all the power allocated to schools, and superintendents and school boards often retain almost all of their authority. Teacher-dominated committees may act only in consultative capacities.

Other systems give much more power to staff and community members. In Akron, Ohio, Central-Hower High School features a nine-member faculty senate in which the principal has only one vote and no veto power (Strauber and others 1990). Chicago's local school councils are dominated by parents and have particularly broad powers, including the ability to hire and fire principals and to approve school budgets and plans (Ogletree and McHenry 1990). Usually, such committees are dominated by teachers, and their powers are apt to be less sweeping. Common responsibilities include control over minor aspects of school finance and school-level planning and policy making.

How Might SBM Improve Student Performance?

Advocates of school-based management argue that student performance is likely to improve when educational management is centered in the school rather than the district. Teachers and principals, they argue, are apt to be more sensitive to the needs of particular schools and students than are central-office administrators. Furthermore, as David (1989) points out, even sound educational reforms may falter if the teachers expected to implement them have not participated in planning them.

SBM's advocates say it has many advantages over decentralized decision-making. Among the purported benefits are creating new sources of leadership, establishing accountability, and aligning budgetary and instructional priorities. White argues that shared decision-making improves staff morale and communication, certainly two critical variables in teacher performance and, indirectly, student performance. SBM may even, she asserts, "help to attract and retain quality staff."

Has SBM Succeeded in Raising Student Performance?

Establishing a relationship between school-based management and student performance is problematic. In the first place, as Malen and her colleagues (1990 a and b) point out, very little quantitative research has been done on the topic. They also argue that factors other than SBM might account for any gains in student achievement made after instituting the reform. These research problems are exacerbated by the absence of a standard definition of SBM. Studies do not always indicate to what degree schools have redistributed power.

Malen and her colleagues (1990a), after reviewing nearly 200 documents, assert that "site-based management in most instances does not achieve its stated objectives." They point out that gains in achievement scores appear "in only a small number of select pilot schools over a short period of time."

The results of SBM in city schools are mixed. A large, urban Maryland school district recorded significant and widespread improvements in test scores, particularly among Afro-Americans, after instituting a five-step reform plan that included SBM (Murphy 1990). But Peterson (1991) reports that test scores for Dade County, Florida's, innercity schools significantly declined after three years of school-based management.

Although improved test scores may provide direct evidence of SBM's ability to enhance student performance, considerable indirect evidence also exists. For example, Brown's (1987) case study of two Canadian school districts suggests that decentralized decision-making creates a more effective educational environment. One school's faculty decided to reduce its use of copy machines so that it could hire an additional aide. The schools' annual reviews show that junior and senior high students' satisfaction increased in most areas after the reform began. The students indicated improvements in such key areas as usefulness and effectiveness of courses and the schools' emphasis on basic skills.

Rosenholtz (1985) notes that collective decision-making has "led to increased teacher clarity about instructional purpose and method and, in the end, to increased instructional effectiveness." Indeed, research

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indicates that SBM improves teacher satisfaction, particularly when teachers have substantive rather than advisory roles (David). In Dade County, Florida, Peterson attributes a more collegial environment among teachers and fewer student suspensions to three years of SBM.

However, Ogletree and McHenry's Chicago survey suggests that SBM is not always popular among teachers. Three-quarters of their 100 respondents said that Chicago's decentralized school reforms had failed to bring improvements in student achievement, and an even greater proportion denied that the changes had improved teacher morale.

In sum, research as a whole does not indicate that site-based management brings consistent or stable improvements in student performance.

Why Has SBM Not Had a More Dramatic Effect on Student Performance?

Malen and her associates (1990a) indicate that many of school-based management's shortcomings are attributable to piecemeal implementation. School councils are commonly controlled by principals, with other participants assuming familiar and passive roles: "the traditional pattern wherein administrators make policy, teachers instruct, and parents provide support is maintained." These "deeply ingrained norms" are difficult to overcome. When council members are poorly trained, they are often confused and anxious about their new responsibilities. However, well-prepared participants are better able to identify duties that are time consuming and impractical.

Indeed, SBM teams often concentrate on schools' tertiary rather than instructional activities. Malen and her colleagues (1990a) note that the councils tend to center on activities such as student recognition and discipline rather than instruction and curriculum. Likewise, Brown indicates that SBM leads some principals to become increasingly interested in technical matters at the expense of curricular concerns.

Yet the neglect of classroom instruction is not inherent to SBM. SBM teams cannot be faulted for failing to increase student performance if they are not given the authority to address that task. In Chicago, for example, authority over education has been delegated largely to parents and other community members, not to school-based personnel. Additionally, it is unfair to expect any school reform to have an effect in urban areas wracked by violence, crime, and poverty.

How Might SBM Enhance Student Performance?

School-based management cannot be judged a failure until it has had a fair trial. Many programs do not concentrate on educational achievement, and many are a variation of traditional hierarchical models rather than an actual restructuring of decision-making power. David argues that districts that actually delegate substantial authority to schools tend to have leaders who support experimentation and who empower others. She and others indicate that successful reform also requires strong communication networks, a financial commitment to professional growth and training, and backing from all components of the school community (see also White; Gomez 1989).

Hill and Bonan (1991) emphasize that school-based management is a truly radical reform, one that shifts power and accountability from managers to the managed, from the central office to the school. They also argue that teachers must be prepared to assume responsibility as well as power, that they must take the initiative in school improvement under SBM, and that they must be held publicly accountable for their performance.

Peterson goes so far as to suggest that 10 percent of teacher and principal performance be based on students' academic performance. With such high stakes in SBM's success, a district that lightly or provisionally undertakes such a shift in decision-making has little chance of success.

Relatively few districts seem prepared to make such widespread changes in school operations. But more cautious attempts at SBM may not result in much power actually changing hands, and halfway measures do not seem to result in substantially improved student achievement.

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